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ABSTRACT

The American family seems to be in a state of constant change, with each family having its own unique set of experiences. Americans are increasingly concerned with what is happening in today's families and what may happen in the future. Four family issues merit further attention: (1) Divorce and its effects on family members; (2) the formation of step families through the process of remarriage; (3) the feminization of the elderly and the need for women to build strong supportive networks of female friends early in life and accept the possibility of later single years as another phase in the female life cycle, and (4) babies having babies. Research points to the importance of the parent-child relationship and parent-child communication in preventing unwanted pregnancies. Although families may be in for some difficult times, they also have the power to remain strong and healthy. (NB)

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Hard Times for Lovers

Challenges Ahead for Families

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". . .Everyone wants to be free.
Ain't these hard times for lovers;
Everyone's singing, I got to be me."

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Hard Times for Lovers
Challenges Ahead for Families

by Marion Tolbert Coleman

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Foreword

This essay was orginally presented at a statewide conference for teachers involved in the Texas Future Problem Solving Program which is sponsored by the Austin Independent School District and funded by the Texas Education Agency. Since 1980 when the program was introduced, Texas students have had the opportunity to perform research and practice problem-solving on a variety of contemporary and futuristic issues. "Evolving Family Structures" was one of the four topics chosen for the 1986-1987 school year.

In her talk to this select group of teachers, Dr. Marion Coleman addressed several of what she feels are the most pressing issues for families, both today and in the future. Although she provides a substantial amount of data on each of her chosen topics, her style is one of a personal essay in which she gives some of her own interpretations and hopes for the future.

Wayne H. Holtzman
President
Hogg Foundation for Mental Health

About the Author. . .

Marion Tolbert Coleman, Ph.D., is Executive Assistant with the Hogg Foundation and Adjunct Assistant Professor on the faculty of the Department of Sociology, The University of Texas at Austin. The subject of the family is principal in her research and teaching interests.

Hard Times for Lovers: Challenges Ahead for Families

I am very pleased to be given the opportunity to write on a subject about which I have very strong feelings, such strong feelings that I went to school as long as they would let me to learn as much as I possibly could about it. The family is a tough subject to study and an even tougher one to teach. It is the only subject I can think of in which everyone has the right to claim, and in my experience seldom hesitates to claim, some expertise.

I am willing to bet that each one of you is convinced that your family was or is the most typical, the most terrible, the least like the Cleavers, the model for the Cosby Show, or the one which unquestionably proves that the Brady Bunch was the most ridiculously simplistic picture of a stepfamily ever presented to the American public. Anyway I think you get my drift.

My point is that our own family experiences act as a filter through which we view every new piece of information on the family we encounter. We carefully read each new statistic relating, for instance, some new factor to divorce and then mentally refigure the odds for the future of our own marital union, that of our parents, or of the next door neighbors who are clearly coexisting on borrowed time.

I must admit that it was, in fact, my personal family experience that drew me back to school when I started my graduate work almost ten years ago. I, too, had read all the statistics—statistics which indicated that, for all sorts of reasons, my marriage should not have lasted longer than the late show. All the features which should have stamped this relationship as doomed were there: married too young to someone I had known for far too short a time, saddled with a baby too soon, and both of us still in school. Couple these ominous signs with the fact that I was upper middle class

with an urban "holier than thou" attitude and he was working class with an alcoholic father, and the prognosis looked pretty gloomy. From everything I could read, the only statistic we had on our side was race and that was even "iffy" since my great great grandmother was Cherokee. Nevertheless, it was something to start with. Maybe enough, for we have stayed married through two children and their ever-surprising adolescence, seven degrees, four for him and three for me, and any number of jobs, houses, pets, and sets of gas station glassware.

And so I went back to school to find out "Why us?" "How and why did we succeed when others with such better opening hands failed?" Having learned a lot, but still not nearly enough, I am now trying to teach some of what I have learned to the next generation of family formers, college upperclassmen. Each semester, I begin by telling my students that I believe that, other than the university courses which prepare them for their career choice, mine is the most important one they will take. I have found that they agree with me and one reason is the fact I started with—the fact that they are using their own family experiences as a filter for what they learn.

Let me explain this a little further because I believe it is a fact we must keep in mind if we are to address adequately the subject of family. Most of my students come to a class in family with their eyes open. They aren't afraid, as they seem to have been in the 60s or 70s, to hear about the down side of relationships, the problems two jobs can bring about, abuse and violence, divorce, the even greater probability of second marriages' breaking up. At the end of my course, the students write that it wasn't all pleasant, but they know it was necessary if they are to be as well-equipped as possible to handle whatever situations that future relationships bring their way.

It wasn't until about half way through the first semester I taught that I realized why they weren't squirming in their

chairs during some of the lectures and why some of their expressions slowly began to resemble the faces on Mount Rushmore. Many of them have been there right on the front line. In retrospect, I was frustrated with myself for being so naive. I know the facts. Researchers now predict that over half of all children born in this country in the 1980s will live through some of their childhood with a single parent. In a recent television special, Phil Donahue told us on prime time that less than 5 percent of all families are of the "Dick and Jane" variety with mom washing up the Tupperware and dad being the sole source of income. Therefore, you must remember that the issues you raise about families of today and tomorrow are already here and waiting for many of these children in their empty houses when they get home from school today.

Moreover, it seems that family is one of the newest of the "hot" topics. Everytime we pick up a paper or turn on the television, we seem to be confronted by some new crisis in the American family. Among the videos I have recorded in recent months are:

- Both Jane Pauley and Barbara Walters looking at working mothers. From these two specials, we learn of the effects, most of them negative, of the massive entrance of moms into the full-time labor force.
- Bill Moyers pointing up the shocking incidence of children born out of wedlock in the black population and the even more distressing attitudes of the young women and men caught in such a cycle. He titled it "Crisis in Black America."
- Jane Pauley again, this time on divorce. She emphasized not just the trauma of the event but new findings on the economic losses to women and the negative effects on children.
- Teenagers being led through a discussion on sexuality and responsibility.

And in the last few months I have clipped articles from popular periodicals on:

- Again, the effects of divorce on children
- The problems of fathers who have custody
- Couples who choose not to have children
- And the recent follow-up *Newsweek* did on the new and already infamous "Yale study." In case you have not been privy to this most recent of bad tidings, researchers now inform us that today a woman unmarried at 35 has only a 5 percent chance of marrying and if she reaches 40 still in that "pitiable" state, those small odds are halved again.[1] Thus *Newsweek* is kind enough to ask single women that burning and mildly sexist question, is it "Too Late for Prince Charming?"

Granted that my professional orientation biases my eye to be drawn to these features when they appear, I nevertheless believe that we are witnessing a marked increase in attention to family issues in the media over the past several years. And if network programmers and magazine editors are supposedly responding to the desires of their audiences, then this may likely indicate a growing interest in the family among the nation's population.

So if Americans are more concerned with what is happening in today's families and what may be likely to happen in the future, we may then ask, is it a legitimate concern? I say yes. As you can see from the topics covered by the media, we have a wonderful selection of worries from which to choose. Arbitrarily, I have decided to concentrate on four today: divorce and its effects on family members, the formation of stepfamilies through the process of remarriage, the feminization of the elderly, and babies having babies.

Divorce. It is a sad state when the news of yet another couple's divorce brings a shrug of the shoulders, a shake of the head, and a "How sad, but I'm not surprised." My

children complain because their weekend social lives are being wrecked by the disappearance of friends to dad's house on first, third, and fifth weekends. We seem to be taking this once earth-shattering event and making it the equivalent of the annual check up at the dentist's office—somewhat uncomfortable but occasionally necessary.

I have a friend, Mike, who, in his role of minister at a church near a university, performed hundreds of weddings. He told me once of a couple with whom he was having a premarital counseling session. He asked them what they would do if they began to have relationship problems. The starry-eyed young woman and the handsome young man looked at each other, smiled, and replied, "Simple, we'll get a divorce." My friend Mike rose from his desk, walked to the door, and said, "Then you will need to find someone else to perform this wedding."

In spite of our own blasé attitudes, those of the neighbors' children, and even of those contemplating outcomes of failed marriages, divorce is not any less traumatic than it has ever been on the family members who must go through it. The stigma along with the "gay divorcée" may be history, but the pain still survives for all parties. Let me start with the couple themselves.

Lenore Weitzman, sociologist at Stanford, has just completed a major study of the effects of no-fault divorce law in California.[2] In short, she has found that, in spite of the erasure of the fault-based, traumatic, mudslinging process, no-fault divorce is devasting economically to women. Perhaps her most startling finding is that while a woman's standard of living decreases 73 percent during the first year after a divorce, a husband's increases an average of 42 percent. Hardest hit are older women who have no experience in the labor force and stand little chance of remarrying. As a short aside, it maybe interesting to you to know that age is a more negative characteristic in the remarriage market than children. Between a 25-year-old with three children

(and we can assume they are not all little darlings) and a 35-year-old with no children, the younger is the more likely to remarry.

Although husbands may fare better financially than their ex-wives after divorce, they too suffer emotionally. Many fathers who have active, positive relationships with their children find that the standard 1, 3, 5 custody arrangement makes "normal" day-to-day interaction with their children close to impossible. These "Disneyland Dads" as they have recently been dubbed complain, "I have so little time with them I want to make it count. I want to make it fun for them so they will want to come. If I get mad at them or they get bored, they may not want to see me." Back at mom's ranch, she gets upset because she always is the bad guy. "I can't compete with the things he does. I don't have time or the money. All they see is that Dad lets them have fun, and I always yell at them."

Recently joint custody has received a lot of attention. Studies show that it is the most beneficial form of custody for all parties "if . . . ." But the "ifs" are big ones and may be impossible for many couples to consider. To work well, ex-spouses must maintain a relatively positive relationship. They will need to be in continual dialogue about the children. The parents need to live close enough to each other so that the children can get from each house to school and from one house to the other. For small children, this usually means the same neighborhood. One unique approach is allowing the children to have their own home and having the parents rotate in and out. This seems to have the least ill effects on children, but not many people can afford three residences (especially after a divorce).

Bringing up joint custody moves us into considering the children. I saw a startling statistic last year. Over 80 percent of children involved in divorces have no warning that their parents are considering such a move until it happens. No wonder so many children fear that they are in some way at

fault. Judith Wallerstein and others are currently exploring the short-term and long-term effects of divorce on children.[3] Contrary to the early myths about divorce causing juvenile deliquency or effeminacy in boys, these researchers are finding that children of all ages are adversely affected psychologically by parental divorce, and that the difficulties are caused by the children's inability to deal with the stress levels associated with the crisis. They are uncovering valuable information on the different emotional reactions among age groups and between the sexes. Later in life these children tend to have more difficulty in establishing long-term relationships than children from intact homes. They are less likely to marry and, when they do, their marriages are more likely to end in divorce than are those of children of nondivorced parents.

In sum, it is clear that the effects of divorce on husbands, wives, and children are serious ones. Moreover, there is no indication that there will be a dramatic change in current divorce rates. Thus, we are talking about a family problem which will, in the foreseeable future, involve more and more persons. Divorce is a phenomenon which we can do little to slow down or stop. Indeed, it is ironic that some persons, including myself, feel that the increase in divorce can be viewed, in some respects, as a healthy sign. It is possible that people today may be more willing than they were in earlier times to leave an unhappy marriage. Women who decide that they can manage economically on their own, even though it may not be quite as well, also decide that they would rather be happy alone than miserable together.

In terms of what we can do, I believe that for one thing, we should direct at least some of our efforts toward empowering all parties who are potential victims of divorce (and one could see this as including virtually everyone except perhaps those women the Yale people are already giving up on). By empowering, I mean helping individuals discover and further develop, within themselves, the strengths they already hold.

For a woman, this means finding out what she wants from life and how she can go about getting it, whether it is an MBA or a husband with an MBA. It means helping women gain the self-knowledge that they need, to know what it is they want in a relationship and then encouraging them not to settle for less.

For men, it means coupling the freedom to choose, which they have usually been allowed to a great extent, with the responsibility and the encouragement to expand their arena of commitment.

Finally, for children it begins with talking. Helping them discover who they are and what inner resources they may hold. The experts say that children handle divorce much better if parents will talk to them, tell them as truthfully as they can why the marriage is ending and what the outcome is likely to mean for the rest of the family. Children are tougher than you think, but they also have imaginations which can create far worse scenarios than the realities.

If such empowerment does take place then we may well see some primary prevention effects on divorce as well. We may find that those who know themselves well and choose carefully what they want, will not only weather the end of a relationship far better, but they may initially choose relationships which are themselves stronger, healthier, and more likely to last.

Stepfamilies. Most people who divorce eventually remarry. It doesn't appear that we give up on the institution but just on the person we have been partnered with in it. And you will be pleased to learn that most remarried persons, when interviewed, state that they are happy in this present marriage, much happier than in the former one. But, alas, the statistics cast their ominous shadows again. You guessed it, the divorce rate for second marriages is even higher than that for first marriages. But why, if these people insist they are happier, why are these marriages even more likely to fail?

The answer is in that word which spelled fear from the very first "once upon a time" you ever heard: "stepfamily." Let me read an excerpt to you from an essay by a woman named Nan Bauer Maglin:

> *I am 41. I have a five-and-a-half-year old adopted daughter who is from Colombia. After 15 years of marriage, I am divorced. My ex-husband lives upstairs from me in a two family brownstone in Brooklyn. Gaby, my daughter, switches households every other day. I live with Jack, who has an adopted son, age 11, and two biological daughters, ages 19 and 20. I am thus a stepparent to three children. Jim, my stepson, comes to our house every weekend; Jack takes him out to dinner every Wednesday evening. He lives in New Jersey with his mother, his stepfather, his two sisters, and his half sister. One final detail: I teach full-time. . . .*
>
> *These are some of the contradictions I continue to live with:*
>
> *They are not my children and never will be. They are his children and her children. He is not the father of my daughter and never will be.*
>
> *I want his children to love me and be with us all the time. I do not want them at all. I am angry at the child-support payments; I feel guilty that I do not want to give to them or do not give enough.*
>
> *I want my daughter all the time, instead of 50 percent of the time. I do not want my ex-husband to father her. I want Jack to father her. I do not want my daughter at all.*
>
> *I want a fifth child, our child. I want no children.*
>
> *I experience a complex emotional package of jealousy, anger and fear. . . [and] it is so much more complicated when you add the points of view of the children and Jack and the ex-husband and the ex-wife and her husband.*[4]

I think that Ms. Maglin's admittedly complicated family situation may not be quite as abnormal as we might wish to believe. It doesn't take more than two pairings, dividings, and repairings, for families to become suddenly strange conglomerations of related, semi-related, and "how were you related again?" individuals. As with divorce, the step-family is a family form that is here to stay and most likely to multiply (almost geometrically).

It is the stresses of meeting the needs of all the various individuals now intricately woven together in this crazy quilt pattern which many times finally lead the two team captains to call it quits. And there isn't much help or support from the outside world either. Personally, I would like to see the individual who can come up with an acceptable new term for "step" families and all their "step" components nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Terms suggested thus far, such as reconstituted, make families feel even worse—in this case, like frozen orange juice. In general, I believe that a first move in dealing with this family issue is that we must make room for these new family configurations and, even more importantly, begin to accept them as within the bounds of normality.

The Feminization of the Elderly. When we talk about "problems" of the elderly, we must remind ourselves that, in general, we are talking about problems of elderly women. Most problems for older persons are connected in some manner to the fact that they are alone, and it is usually the women who are alone. Eighty percent of all men over 65 are married. Only 40 percent of all women over this age are married.

In a previous paper, I reminded the women in my audience that even if their marriages remained intact, they would most likely end their lives by themselves anyway. The

statistics on widowhood are depressing ones. Three out of every four wives can expect to be widowed. The median age at widowhood is a mere 56 years, and a woman who is widowed at 60 can expect to live an average of another 16 years before her own demise. The implications of these statistics are many.

To begin with, a woman who is widowed does not have a high probability of finding a new partner. Researchers have found that people remarry people with similar backgrounds: divorced people marry divorced people and widows marry widowers. From the statistics I just cited you already know there are not nearly enough widowers to go around for all the eligible widows. Moreover, we also know that, in remarriages, men tend to marry women even younger than they did the first time around: the age gap on second marriages increases to an average of ten years. So if a widowed woman does remarry and her husband follows the age gap norm, she will most likely be widowed a second time.

But enough cheery forecasting. I have done quite a bit of thinking about this last chapter awaiting me at the end of my life and I have decided that I and other women need to begin to lay the groundwork now so that those last years of singlehood can be as rich as the preceding ones of coupledom. And the answer is fairly simple. If we are to end our years in a world populated by females, then we need to start building a strong supportive network of female friends early in our lives. We need to view our times spent with women as just as important and vital to our well-being as the time spent in the company of our chosen male. We need to view the possibility of these later single years as yet another phase in our life cycle, one containing new opportunities for growth.

Finally, the increase in life span also means that we are seeing more and more young elderly women taking care of their old elderly mothers. Elaine Brody reminds us that we have extended the life span so long that the women caught in the middle now may be 60 and nearing retirement, with an

80-year-old frail mother, a 35-year-old working daughter, and an adolescent granddaughter.[5] And if they all live long enough, in only five to seven years' time that scenario could easily add another generation. Couple these facts with the recent "reverse empty nest syndrome," i.e., adult children moving home when marriages fail or education ends, and we have some women here with their hands pretty darn full.

Out-of-wedlock births. This is the only family problem which I have included in my discussion that we literally can do something about in terms of prevention. No matter how many times I read it, I still have a hard time coming to terms with the fact that out-of-wedlock births are at an all-time U.S. high. As a matter of fact, I refuse to come to terms with it and I think we should all refuse.

Today we know that young people are engaging in sex more than ever before in history. We also know that the largest group of sexually active young women uses no form of contraception at all. One million teenage girls will give birth this year. The illegitimate birthrate has risen so sharply that currently more than one out of every five children born is born out of wedlock, and among the black population over half of all babies are born to unwed mothers. Recently, *Time* magazine reported that 40 percent of today's 14-year-old girls will become pregnant at least once before they are 20.[6] They are making their mothers grandmothers before the age of thirty and chances are good their daughters will return the favor. Most of these births are to young women living below the poverty line. The Hogg Foundation has made this problem one of its highest priorities in recent years. A program recently funded by the Foundation is an endeavor directed at one of the saddest situations I have encountered—young unmarried girls facing the prospect of another pregnancy after already having one child. The goal of

the program is to keep them from having such repeat pregnancies while building their self-esteem and personal skills to a level where the future has some hope.

From all the evidence I have seen, it appears that the one critical factor in stemming this tide is how close young people are to their parents. Researchers have found that the more time parents spend with their children, the closer they are and the more openly they can talk, the more restrained and conservative are teenagers in their sexual behavior. Isn't it a shame that a possible solution which seems so simple and so cost-effective is so difficult for many parents to attain?

Conclusions. This essay is titled "Hard Times for Lovers" after a favorite song recorded by Judy Collins.[7] I do believe that these are hard times for lovers, their marriages, their children, their parents, and the children of their children. I also do not believe that many of the situations that have caused these hard times will change. A few we can tackle head on. We can encourage abused wives to get help for themselves and their spouses, and we can set up treatment programs to try to break the cycle of violence in families. We can try to teach young persons to act responsibly as they develop dating relationships and attempt to instill in them a built-in braking system (whether it is based on morals or self-esteem or something else, just so long as it clicks in).

But as I have tried to point up in this paper, many times what we are talking about when we speak of family problems are situations brought about by the desire of persons to have all they need and want to function as productive, physically and mentally healthy human beings. Thus women will continue to work; most economically have no choice. Marriages will continue to break up; we will likely become even less tolerant of bad relationships. Remarriages

and stepfamilies will keep on forming; we really do want to be coupled. And we will continue to die, usually men first.

So if we are looking at a set of apparently never-ending problems or situations, what can we change? I believe the answer is that we can change ourselves. We can either run and hide and hope they will go away or at least not affect anyone we know and love, or we can begin to develop a game plan now. We can always carry the hope that we will never have to pull out our play book, but we should keep the equipment in order just in case. I believe that families are in for some hard times, but I also believe that we have the power to keep them strong and healthy if we so choose.

Footnotes

1. Eloise Salholz, et al. "Too Late for Prince Charming?" *Newsweek* June 2, 1986, pp. 54-61.

2. Lenore Weitzman, *The Divorce Revolution*. New York: The Free Press, 1985.

3. Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan B. Kelly, "Effects of Parental Divorce." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 46, 1976, pp. 257-269.

4. Nan Bauer Maglin, "It Could Not Be More Complicated." *Ms.* February, 1985, p. 40.

5. Elaine Brody, "Parent Care as a Normative Family Stress." *The Gerontologist* 25, 1985, pp. 19-28.

6. Claudia Wallis, "Children Having Children." *Time* 126:23, December 9, 1985, pp. 78-90.

7. Hugh Prestwood, "Hard Times for Lovers." © 1978 Careers Music, Inc.